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ABSTRACT

Advertising plays on the broad feelings of alienation (defined as an individual's frustrated or estranged responses to economic and sociological phenomena which affect that individual's place in society) which are endemic to the American consumer society and are, in Marxist views, symptomatic of any capitalist system. By generating anxieties and dissatisfactions and then offering products as escape hatches, advertising fuels the cycle of consumerism. Modern advertising began in the last half of the nineteenth century and was often targeted at the newly emerging consumer immigrant class who found earning and spending a way of combatting the loneliness of the ethnic ghetto. Contemporary electronic and print advertising furnishes many clear examples of five major types of alienation: (1) powerlessness; (2) meaninglessness; (3) normlessness; (4) isolation; and (5) self-estrangement. American consumption culture thrives on the results of this advertising, and will continue to do so until individual perceptions change and no nation needs to be number one in the world. (ARH)

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The Lonely Consumer: Advertising and Alienation

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In their 1982 book Channels of Desire, Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen trace the development of the American consumer and the whole idea of a consumer-oriented culture from a classically Marxist perspective in which the concept of alienation is the central feature of life in a capitalistic system. They argue that this alienation is at the root of consumerism as we know it, consumption being a momentary balm for feelings of isolation and estrangement. These arise because workers are separated from the end results of their labors and have become slaves to the wage system. The Ewens note that while the rise of American Consumerism was tied to capitalism and industrialization, more importantly, it was linked to the large-scale emigrations coming mainly from Europe which brought not only inexpensive labor for American industry but potential consumers for its products. The Ewens point out that in its original French usage (and in the eyes of these newcomers), consumption had negative connotations, " . . .to consume was

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an act of pillage. It meant to take up completely, devour, waste, spend" and in another definition ". . .it meant to destroy, to use up, to waste, to exhaust." The older meaning, they say, is best expressed in the old name for tuberculosis or "Consumption." With industrialization, the idea of using things up (e.g., raw materials, space, etc.) became linked to prosperity, and the word "consumer" gradually became more neutral, then even self-congratulatory, until today without a second thought or a blush of shame, Americans pridefully refer to themselves as "consumers," and now there are consumer columns in newspapers, consumer movements, consumer advocates, and even a monthly magazine called Consumer Report. (Ewens and Ewens, 1982).

The new immigrants (from whatever homeland) were initially not prime targets for this movement to a consumer philosophy of life. They were usually people of the land, (peasants and sharecroppers) who were not used to wasting. In their native lands, the home and not the factory was the production center for most of what the family ate, wore, used until it wore out, and then somehow re-cycled. But the new country was depicted for them as a wonderful bazaar where they might find marvelous goods in abundance, ready-made, and easily available. "Work hard!" was the advice, "and you might be able to bankroll a return to your homeland to trade your money (or 'false estate' as they

thought of currency) for your own piece of land" (or 'real estate' by contrast). This explains the importance of home ownership to immigrants. A classic appeal to this dream was a brochure distributed by woolen manufacturers which was circulated in Southern Italy to encourage emigration to New England. It depicted ". . .a mill on one side of the street and a bank on the other--and workers trooping from one to the other with bags of money under their arms" stacking up their bankroll for the trip back to the homeland (Ewens and Ewens, 1982: 47). While the prospects seemed great, upon arrival the newcomers usually found themselves trapped by the wage system and at the same time, discovered that wages were different from land. Capital--now that was similar to land--replenishing and growing, but wages, they were different--hard to earn and always used up too soon. This was one of the earliest painful lessons in the process called "Americanization" which early social workers Simon Lubin and Christina Krysto bitterly spoofed in their version of the melting pot theory which was ballyhooed to newcomers:

> "Come on all you foreigners, and jump into this magic kettle. You are colored and discolored with things that do not fit in well here. . . .In fact to speak frankly, there is a certain taint about you, a stain brought by the old world. . .Your clothes are ill-fitting and ugly. Your language is barbaric. Of course we do not hold you personally responsible; for you have come from backward and antiquated civilizations, relics of the dark ages. . .Jump into the cauldron and behold! You emerge new creatures, up-to-date with new customs, habits, traditions, ideals. Immediately you become like us; the taint will disappear. Your sacks will be exchanged for the

> latest Fifth Avenue styles. Your old-fogey notions will give way to the most modern and new-fangled ideas. You will be reborn. In short, you will become full-fledged Americans. The magic process is certain. Your money back if we fail."(Ewens and Ewens, 1982:53)

And of course, central to this magical transformation was consumption--in the non-tuberculean sense of course. And the consumption was of American-made goods produced by capitalism, workers, and the wage system of labor. Money, or better yet, the things that money could buy became the mass media of the newly emerging immigrant consumer class. Quite logically, modern advertising developed as a tool of consumerism beginning in the last half of the 19th century to foster this system of earning and spending. To the immigrants, (who were already alienated by their looks, their accents, their customs and their heritage), earning and spending became an appealing way of working one's way out of their empty and lonely lives in the ethnic ghetto. In 1907, Edward Devine, editor of Survey magazine wrote ". . . home has ceased to be the glowing center of production from which radiates all desirable goods and has become a pool towards which products made in other places flow--a place of consumption, not of production."(Devine, 1907:58). The consumption becomes a momentary escape from the alienation experienced by the worker who was separated from the object of his work and hopelessly trapped by the wage system. But you've got to keep this ball rolling and how to do it? Arthur Asa Berger writes concerning the problem:

> "Advertising is an essential institution in advanced capitalist societies because it is necessary to motivate people to work hard so that they can accumulate money which can then be used to buy things. But in addition people must be driven to consume, must be made crazy to consume, for it is consumption that maintains the economic system. Thus alienation generated by a capitalist system is functional, for the anxieties and miseries generated by this system tend to be assuaged by impulsive consumption. . . Advertising generates anxieties, creates dissatisfactions, and in general feeds on the alienation present in capitalist societies to maintain the consumer culture."(Berger, 1982: 57).

What are the strategies of alienation, and how are they used in contemporary American advertising? For our purposes, we will use Kaiser and Chandler's definition of alienation as ". . .an individual's frustrated or estranged responses to economic and sociological processes which affect that individual's place in society" (Kaiser and Chandler, 1984: 203-4) and we will use Seeman's classic categories or types of alienation (Seeman, 1959):

1. Powerlessness
2. Meaninglessness
3. Normlessness
4. Isolation
5. Self-estrangement.

We will briefly explore each of these strategies of alienation and examine examples of how they are used in contemporary electronic and print advertisement.

Powerlessness

Power has several dimensions. There is economic power, physical power, political power, and social power, to name a few. Then there are power-holders and power seekers. This strategy of alienation places the consumer in a power-seeker position and presents him or her with vignettes, images, icons, or emblems of power which can be had--but for a price. For example, consider the classic Marlboro cigarette ads. The storyline is simple--a weathered, handsome, and serene man lights his Marlboro with a piece of burning sagebrush at the end of a hard day's cowpunching. Now no consumer really expects to become the Marlboro Man, but we can be <u>like</u> him if we adopt his most obvious emblem of manhood and one which is imminently available--the cigarette. Interestingly, Marlboros were originally and unsuccessfuly marketed as a woman's cigarette. The bold red and white colors were introduced to the packaging and the inverted "v" of the coloring was intended to symbolize masculine broad shoulders. Or consider the newest ads for the Ugly Stik Lite, a graphite fishihg rod. Hulk Hogan has it bent in half and it still won't break. The copy reads "Ugly Stick is so strong, it's even a match for the sensational Hulk Hogan!" And it would be easy to name other examples of advertisments aimed at both men and women which promise increased physical power. Clearly advertising promises individual power to consumers, if they will just purchase the product. Most ads for muscle building or

weight machines emphasize increased strength and power. Men's cologne ads especially promise sexual strength and power which are related to the physical dimension.

What about economic power? It is most obviously demonstrated by conspicuous consumption. It is not surprising that we find ourselves surrounded by appeals which will permit us to demonstrate economic power like the following: "Did you know that you can lease a BMW for as low as $186/month?" or the consumer's nemesis "Now you qualify for an additional $2,000 worth of credit on your Visa card?" or how about shelling out $150/day to fish in the "In-Fisherman Celebrity Jamboree!!" and since the jamboree helps the handicapped, the ad advises that you remember, "A portion of your cost is tax deductible!" something rich consumers always need to worry about. These appeals to economic power always seem to imply that spending is a sure-fire way to demonstrate your individual powerfulness.

Of course political power comes in a variety of packages too. For example, there is the "Rainbow Coalition" where the wretched, the poor, the downtrodden and those otherwise alienated in some way can get together and beat the establishment. The recent surprise elections in the Illinois primary demonstrate the persuasiveness of Lyndon LaRouche's promises of delivering political power to the radical right. Pat Robertson of the 700 Club is making

similar promises to the born again, and may even run for president. On a more mundane level take the promises made by the many lobbying efforts put on by various groups such as political action committees, pressure groups, and even bogus political groups such as the one which recently bilked thousands of retired persons by claiming to be a watchdog on social security benefits. In all of these cases, the alienated and politically powerless are promised a chance to control their own destiny.

Sometimes the product itself epitomizes powerfulness. For example Dodge trucks are built "Ram Tough" and they have "I-Beam" suspension while Chevrolet trucks have powerful McPherson Struts. Every automobile battery is "heavy duty," and the McCullough Chain saw has "Dual Triggers." to help you cut down the biggest trees. The Rapala fillet knife for 1986 has " More Guts than any knife in the world," and the Sears riding mower has ". . .extra power to tackle extra tough jobs. . ." And of course again there are numerous other examples that could be cited.

Meaninglessness

Advertising which promises the consumer some kind of individual effectiveness in an otherwise immense and monolithic world plays on consumer feelings of meaninglessness. The individual effectiveness might be related to such socially conscious issues as poverty where

you can sponsor a child for only $10 a month and you will be providing emergency food, clothing and medical care to Larni, a Thai youngster who lives in a wooden shack, built on stilts over a disease-infested swamp, and who only gets a bowl of rice for supper. As an added bonus you will give her a chance to go to school and you will help her family and community with counseling on agriculture, housing, nutrition, and other vital areas. Or take another approach to the problem of Meaninglessness--an ad for the American Express card reads,"The American Express Card. It's part of a lot of interesting lives." as the young couple in the ad load an original oil painting into the back of their MG. Fundamentalist religious broadcasting which has grown so rapidly during the past 10 years "advertises" its promise of new meaning to persons who perceive their lives as meaningless. Ads that define also provide meaning. For example, Michelob's "week-ends are made for Michelob" attempts to link week-ends and beer drinking. Again other examples of the potency of advertising appeals to meaninglessness abound.

Normlessness

One of the areas where advertising is especially aimed in the normlessness category is in fashion advertising. We know that the young are especially vulnurable to such advertising. The new "Miami Vice" look signifies that you

have met the expected norm. Fashions become the emblem for "fitting in." Ewen and Ewen refer to the marketing of the humble blue jean (Ewen and Ewen, 1982). Originally, associated with miners, farm laborers, migrant workers and others of the proletariat, the blue jean indicated poverty. A fashionable person wouldn't be caught dead in them. But, during the Civil Rights movement and anti-war years they were worn as a political statement and to identify oneself with the norm of rebellion and protest. But look what happens when modern advertising comes to the rescue of blue jeans in the 80's. Now you can market a common staple as if it were a Parisian design. Ewen and Ewen describe a display of an entire side of posters on a New York bus ". . .an assembly line of female backsides pressed emphatically into their designer jeans. On the right hip pocket of each, the signature of an heiress." (Ewen and Ewen, 1982: 109). Or take the "French" blue jean--Bon Jour--"Built to look like you're moving even when you're idle." What an appeal to the Protestant ethic, and as Ewen and Ewen put it "Ben Franklin would have loved it."(Ewen and Ewen, 1982: 110) The 24-49 year old market is also vulnerable to appeals to fashion as the whole "Yuppie~" and "Muppie" market segments demonstrate.

Apparently, only the 50+ market seems unaffected by fashion, and even then the reasons are unclear. Kaiser and Chandler find that age 50+ consumers report being alienated

by contemporary fashion advertising being unable to find fashions that please them, that symbolize them, or that fit them. As a result they feel "left out" and express a ". . .lack of identification with sociocultural symbols which are presented in televised fashion commercials." (Kaiser and Chandler: 1984: 212). It is interesting that Kaiser and Chandler say these older consumers feel "Alienated" by fashion advertising (Kaiser and Chandler, 1984). Naturally, they are alienated--they can't find a fashion emblem to indicate the norms to which they ascribe. But they aren't imune from appeals to the need for a norm. Howard Miller grandfather clocks are pitched to that market segment, for instance, with the lines "More than clocks, a lifestyle. For clocks that express the way you live, the name is Howard Miller." When products associate themselves with lifestyle characteristics, they are acknowledging norms. Examples include "Miller, made the American way" and "At Ford, Quality is Job 1." Coors beer commericals with Mark Harmon reflect the values of "rugged individualism."

Isolation

Appeals made to the alienation caused by either social or interpersonal isolation abound in contemporary advertising. "The Pepsi Generation" is a classic case in point. The product promises to move you to a beach with bikini-clad lasses and open-faced young men playing

volley-ball. Smirnoff Vodka depicts a lonely girl in an empty room at a busy party. She is being befriended by two handsome and clean-cut lads who offer her a drink as the ad copy declares "Friends are worth Smirnoff." Or take Dry Idea deoderant which promises that you won't be a social isolate if only you "Take Control. . . .Never let them see you sweat." These appeals offer the product to the isolated consumer as either a means of identifying with the crowd or as a protection against some imagined faux pas which would result in social banishment. However, there is another kind of loneliness which relates to one-to-one or interpersonal isolation with significant others. American Greetings use this to market their "In Touch" cards. In one ad the copy reads, "How to tell your mother that all the guys have pierced ears." While the "In Touch" card saves the chap from isolation from his mom saying "I need to be accepted just the way I am." In another in the series the husband's card to his working wife reads "Can I have an appointment to talk to you. . .Please?"

Self-Estrangement

Self-estrangement differs from lonliness in that it isn't limited to relations with other persons. It means, instead, being separated from one's work, one's friends, one's family, and even from life itself. The worker, in Marx's eye, experiences him or herself as an object--a thing

which is more the receiver than the initiator of action--acted upon rather than acting upon. Advertising promises one a chance to cease being an object and to start to become a subject. "Diet Centers" tells of previously obese persons who took charge of their lives and thus escaped the social estrangement they had imposed on themselves. The ad copy reads "First I changed my body, then I changed my mind. . . .I'm more confident, more in control." Ford Motor Company pitches its product by demonstrating that its workers aren't estranged. We see them in the ad running robots instead of being robots. The ad copy reads "It's a good feeling to know you're helping build the highest quality American cars and trucks. That's what happens when you make quality Job # 1." This example also acknowledges that ads may indeed incorporate several strategies in one execution.

Conclusion

In conclusion, advertising plays on the broad feelings of alienation which Marx described as part of the life-sentence of the worker in a capitalist system. It offers products as escape hatches from feelings of separation caused by being forced into labor in order to keep up with the earn/spend cycle. He writes of this forced labor:

"It is not the satisfaction of a need, but only a means for satisfying other needs. Its alien character is clearly shown by the fact that as soon as there is no physical or other compulsion, it is avoided like the plague."(Marx, 1964).

We have identified at least five major types of this alienation as well as several sub-types and have demonstrated through numerous examples how these serve as the springboards for potent advertising appeals. Our consumption culture thrives on the results of this advertising. But are there any solutions short of changing the entire capitalistic system? Perhaps by changing individual perceptions. Ewens and Ewens exemplify the power of shifting perception when they quote William Appleman Williams when he advises that we must try to visualize what it would belike to have a "world without empire." In other words, what would it be like if there was no need for nations to be #1 in the world. That kind of perceptual shift occurred during the anti-war movement for masses of people. They saw that it wasn't necessary to be the world's police force and perhaps because it did happen and people visualized a world without U. S. military dominance, we were able to extricate ourselves from Viet Nam.

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